Understanding the nature of place-based challenges

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 6

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Tools for Shared Agendas is a series of practical instruments designed to support collective work on place-based challenges under conditions of complexity. The tools build on established frameworks in systems thinking and transformative innovation policy and are adapted for use within Shared Agenda processes.

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1. Why understanding the nature of challenges matters in Shared Agendas[1]

Shared Agenda processes often bring together people and organisations who recognise the same place-based problematic situation but interpret its nature differently. Some parts of the situation may require clear procedures, technical analysis or expert design. Other parts may require experimentation, observation and adjustment. In moments of disruption, immediate stabilisation may also be needed before longer-term work can continue.

Understanding the nature of the challenge helps participants align expectations about how to act. It clarifies what can be planned, what needs to be analysed, what should be tested through practice, and what requires immediate stabilisation. This matters because mismatches between the nature of the situation and the response can create systemic inhibitors. Complex situations treated as technical problems often produce rigid plans, weak learning and limited ownership. Urgent situations approached through long analysis can increase fragmentation and delay stabilisation.

This tool helps participants recognise that a place-based challenge may contain different types of situations, each requiring a different way of working.

2. What this tool is used for

This tool helps participants distinguish the different types of situations present within a place-based challenge.

It is used to clarify which parts of the challenge call for standard procedures, which require technical analysis, which need experimentation and learning, and which require immediate stabilisation.

The tool helps participants:

- recognise the different modes of action required within the same challenge
- align expectations about planning, uncertainty, learning and control

[1] This analysis and tool build on the Cynefin framework as described by Snowden and Boone (2007), *A Leader's Framework for Decision Making*, Harvard Business Review, and use it as a structured reference for understanding the systemic nature of challenges within Shared Agenda processes.

- identify where responses are creating rigidity, fragmentation or confusion
- clarify how procedures, analysis, experimentation and stabilisation can work together
- support coordination between initiatives that operate under different conditions

The result is a clearer basis for organising collective work in ways that fit the different parts of the challenge.

3. How the tool is structured

The tool distinguishes five types of situations.[2]

Simple situations

Cause and effect are clear. There is a known way of doing things and broad agreement on what works. Typical responses include standard procedures, protocols, rules, routine execution and compliance.

Complicated situations

Cause and effect exist, but they require analysis. Several viable options may be possible, and expert knowledge is needed to understand the situation and design responses. Typical responses include diagnosis, technical analysis, expert judgement, specialised tools and negotiated design.

Complex situations

Cause and effect become clear only through practice. The situation changes as people act, perspectives differ, and actions generate effects that cannot be fully anticipated. Typical responses include experimentation, observation, interpretation and adjustment through learning.

Chaotic situations

The situation is highly disrupted and requires immediate action to restore a minimum level of stability. Typical responses include acting quickly to contain damage, stabilising the situation, and then shifting towards a more appropriate mode of action once stability has been restored.

[2] Cynefin Framework, developed by Dave Snowden.

Confusion

Confusion appears when participants act from different assumptions about the nature of the situation. One part of the group may treat the issue as technical, another as complex, and another as urgent. This can produce contradictory responses, weak coordination and unclear expectations. Naming the confusion helps participants clarify which parts of the situation require which type of response.

Most place-based challenges include several types of situations at the same time. For example, housing affordability may include:

- simple elements, such as safety standards, building codes or regulatory compliance
- complicated elements, such as land-use rules, financing mechanisms or taxation instruments
- complex elements, such as changing living practices, acceptance of new housing models or shifts in local expectations
- chaotic elements, such as sudden displacement or emergency housing needs

Using the tool helps participants distinguish these layers and align responses accordingly.

4. How SharedAgendas.org uses this tool

SharedAgendas.org uses this tool at the start of place-based transformation processes, when participants need to clarify what kind of challenge they are dealing with and how different parts of the situation should be approached.

The discussion brings implicit assumptions into the open. It clarifies which elements can be handled through procedures, which require technical analysis, which call for experimentation and learning, and which need immediate stabilisation.

This distinction matters for coordination. A Shared Agenda may include initiatives that operate under different logics at the same time: some focused on compliance or delivery, others on analysis and design, others on experimentation, and others on urgent response. Making these differences explicit helps participants organise collective work with more realistic expectations.

The tool also makes visible responses that are poorly matched to the situation. Rigid planning, excessive analysis, fragmented coordination or delayed stabilisation can become inhibitors when they limit learning, adaptation or timely action.

In this way, the tool supports a shared orientation for combining different modes of action within the same Shared Agenda.

5. The template for understanding the nature of place-based challenges

